

New York's Seventeenth-Century African Burial Ground in History

By Christopher Moore

New York's African Burial ground is the nation's earliest and largest known African American cemetery. It has been called one of the most important archaeological finds of our time. But it is more than that: though long hidden and much violated, it remains the final resting-place of some of New York's earliest African and African-American pioneers. And it is an enduring testament to their history.

The first known person of African descent to arrive on Manhattan Jan (Juan)Rodrigues, who was among the navigators, traders, pirates, and fishermen who traversed the Atlantic as free men, before and during the slavery ear. Rodrigues, a free black sailor from Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) arrived in 1613, setting up a trading post with the native Lenape people on Manhattan Island.

The first enslaved African arrived in New Amsterdam in 1625, as laborers for the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The WIC, whose profits were chiefly from commerce reliant upon slave labor (and later the slave trade), was then pursuing its interest in the fur trade, which had been cultivated by early traders like Rodrigues. Along with European merchants, traders, sailors, and farms, these enslaved workers helped to establish the early colony. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Africans were an important part of the city's population, reaching a peak of over 20 percent at the middle of the eighteenth century.

During Dutch rule, enslaved Africans were put to work building the fort, mill, and new stone houses. The African laborers, some with previous experience building colonies in South America, did much of the arduous work of building a European-style town in New Amsterdam. They cleared land for farms and shore areas for docks. Former Native American trails were broadened (Broad Way) to accommodate horse drawn wagons. Operating and working in the colony's sawmills, the enslaved laborers provided lumber for shipbuilding and export back to Europe.

By 1640, about 500 people lived in New Amsterdam, which was community of shops, a few dozen homes, and several warehouses belonging to the WIC. Enslaved farm workers often oversaw the colony's farms for absentee Dutch owners, plating, harvesting and managing the day-to-day operations. These farming skills would soon win something very valuable for some of New Amsterdam's enslaved population-their freedom. During the worst fighting of the Dutch and Indian War, the first community of free blacks in the colonial United States was formed.

On February 25, 1644, eleven enslaved men were freed and given grants of farmland in the dangerous frontier territory north of New Amsterdam. Their wives were granted freedom also, but their children remained the enslaved property of the WIC. In time, they were able to buy the freedom of their children. The farms owned by the free blacks

spanned the "Negro frontier" "land of the blacks," the Central region of Manhattan extending eventually from what would later become Canal Street to 34th Street.

Freedom for these black farmers did not mean an end to slavery in New Amsterdam. Slave labor continued as a major element of the colony's public works projects. In 1653, upon Governor Peter Stuyvesant's orders, the colony's enslaved workers helped to build New Amsterdam's most famous fortification, The Wall" (Wall Street), which spanned Manhattan Island from the East River to the Hudson River. In 1658, the same labor force constructed the region's first major highway, connecting New Amsterdam with the island's second largest and newly founded village in the north frontier (at 110 Street and the East River). The eleven-mile "road to New Haarlem" later became better known and remembered as the Boston Post Road.

Slavery was a chief concern of Governor Stuyvesant, who cultivated the distribution of slaves into Virginia, Maryland, and New England, but primarily throughout the Caribbean. Under Stuyvesant, the WIC encouraged English and French planters in Barbados, St. Christopher, and other islands to convert from tobacco and cotton to the more lucrative sugar production. Island by island, planters were shown how to consolidate their small island farms into large plantations, change to sugar, and invest in slave labor. The WIC invested heavily in all aspects of the cane production, providing credit, plant equipment, and enslaved African laborers. By the 1650's, Barbados, the first successful model for the exploitation of slave labor in the Caribbean had revolutionized the demand for enslaved Africans into the West Indies. Stuyvesant worked diligently, from his base in New Amsterdam to Curacao, to repeat the process in other receptive islands.

In 1664, the English conquered the Dutch colony, and New Amsterdam became New York. Named for James II, the Duke of York, who was the principle investor in the "Company of Royal Adventures Trading to Africa," the English slave trading enterprise. The Duke soon afterward gave port privileges and warehouse priority in the New York colony to ships engaged in the slave trade.

The English imposed strict laws regarding slavery and rescinded many rights for free blacks, including the right to own land on Manhattan Island. During the period, New York's African labor force - primarily skilled and semiskilled and mostly enslaved worked as carpenters, blacksmiths, printers, sailors, dock loaders, tailors, seamstresses, bakers, and servants.

In 1711, a market place for the sale of slaves opened on a pier located at Wall Street and the East River. By legislative act of the Common Council (City Council) the market, known as the Meal Market, became the city's official slave market, where African men, women, and children were sold or rented on a daily or weekly basis. The market operated until 1762, though it was not the only place where slaves were bought and sold in Lower Manhattan, including the Merchant's Coffee House, the Fly Market, and Proctor's Vendue House. Records from colonial New York indicate the city was a major hub for the slave trade in North America.

Although the city's slave population ranged between 15 to 20 percent, most slaves purchased through the New York market were redirected to other slave holding territories in the American South. Documents also note that the New York market sometimes received shipments of African children under the age of thirteen. Until the Civil War, the city's economy, with investments in commodities like sugar, cotton, and tobacco was heavily dependent upon slavery.

Shut out of churchyards within the city, a burial ground for Africans developed on a plot of land outside of the city, owned in 1673 by Sara Van Borsum, a Dutch woman with a reputation as an Indian translator and owner of six slaves (five African and one Indian). Though the exact date of the cemetery's founding is unknown, the Van Borsum family continued its tacit approval of its use until its closing in 1794.

As the enslaved population grew in New York, so did the burial ground, eventually covering 6.6 acres, or about five city blocks. Evidence from the cemetery indicates that when possible, traditional practices were employed in laying deceased kin and loved ones to rest. However, harsh legal restrictions were applied too, as no more than twelve persons were permitted in funeral processions or at graveside services, and interment was not allowed at night, the customary time for many African burial rituals. Enslaved blacks were required to have a written pass in order to travel more than a mile away from home. For many, that was about the distance from their Lower Manhattan homes to the cemetery.

Despite these restrictions, the African Burial Ground served as an important focus for African community identity. Archaeological excavations have shown that the dead were buried individually, most in wooden coffins, arms folded or placed at their sides and oriented with heads to the west. Bodies were buried in shrouds, fastened with brass straight pins, and were sometimes buried with items such as coins, shells, and beads. Over time, the Burial ground became densely crowded with burials stacked three and four deep in some places. Some archaeologists estimate that 20,000 men, women, and children were buried at the cemetery.

In 1795, the land of the African Burial ground was subdivided and sold for house lots. Because it lay in a ravine, the land was leveled with as much as twenty-five feet of fill, ensuring the survival of many graves under the basements of later buildings.

In the twentieth century, the area where the African Burial ground is located developed as New York's government center. During these years the existence of the African Burial ground, though recorded on old maps, was effectively forgotten. In 1991 -1992 archaeological excavation of the northern portion of the burial ground occurred as the site was being prepared for construction of a federal office building. The remains of 419 men, women, and children were excavated: nearly half of whom were children under twelve years of age. In 1999, nine intact burials (full or nearly complete human skeletons) were found on the southern edge of the historic ground during construction of the new sidewalk in front of the Tweed Building on Chambers Street. Unmarked beneath

the bluestone sidewalk, thousands walk by or over the burials daily, unaware that much of the cemetery still exists under the neighborhood's sidewalks, roadbeds, and buildings.

The African Burial Ground was designated a New York City Historic District and a National Landmark in 1993. Between 1991 and 2003, an analysis of the human remains was conducted at Howard University. On October 4, 2003, some ten thousand participants in the "Rites of Ancestral Return" helped re-inter the ancestral remains (each in a hand-carved wooden coffin made in Ghana) on the preserved portion of the site. Nearly 8,000 personal handwritten messages from the living to the African ancestors were also buried with the remains. In February 2006, by order of Pres. George W. Bush, the African Burial ground was proclaimed a national monument.

On October 5, 2007, the African Burial ground National Monument became the first National Monument dedicated to Africans of early New York and Americans of African descent. It is the newest National Monument in New York City, joining the Statue of Liberty, Governors Island, and Castle Clinton.